Art and AI. What Kind of AI Do We Want? Bringing Artistic and Technological Practices Together.

Main Teaching Staff: Nora al Badri & Felix Stalder

This is a joint module for BFA students (ZHdK) and BA students of Computer Science (ETH) to bring together artistic and technological perspectives taking place in both universities. Our starting point is to consider «Artificial Intelligence» (AI) as a historical-material practice, that is, shaped by the concrete conditions of its development and use. The special focus is on the "**Personas of AI**", that is, the way we encounter different AI applications (as assistants, experts, helpers, friends, oracles etc.), but also how they encounter us, that is, what they assume about and expect from us.

We will combine theoretical reflection, artistic and technical practices, and hands-on group work.

We will address the current discourse within our democratically shaped society around AI. The main topics will be:

- AI personas, personhood, agents
- ecology, subjectivity
- history of AI, (de)colonial practices
- non-Western, indigenous, marginalized AI
- creating with/ about AI

The students get to know a completely new field (art ←→ computer science). They have tested how inspiring interdisciplinary collaboration can be and applied their newly acquired knowledge by designing a practice-oriented project/ AI+Art prototype in mixed groups. In addition, they take away with them the social and ecological contribution that can be made with ML.

At the end of the seminar, interdisciplinary teams will develop concepts for joint practice-related projects in AI and art.

PAD FOR NOTES

Logistics and Requirements

Date: 7.-11.04.2025 (Monday voluntary for ETH students)

Time: 09:00 -17:00 (except Friday, 09:00 - 13:00)

Location

- Monday - Wednesday @ZHDK (Pfingstweidstrasse 96, 8031 Zürich)
  - 7.04. ZT 5.D02
  - 8. & 9.04. ZT 6.K03
- Thursday - Friday @ETH (Universitätstrasse 2, 8092 Zürich)
  - 10. &11. 04. LFW B3

Requirements (for ZHdK Students)

Presence, at least 80%

Contribution to discussions in class

Participation in group work and presentation of results.

Monday: Introduction to Machine Learning

Monday voluntary for ETH students

Technical and practical introduction to AI for artisits with Alexandre Puttick

Some of the concepts covered are:

- linear regressions
- loss functions
- gradient descent
- latent space
- generation
- Retrieval Augmented Generation (RAG) for LLMs

- https://huggingface.co/playground
- https://huggingface.co/chat/assistants

- Alexandre Puttick, Slides from Presentation, PDF

Tuesday: Human and Non-Human Personas

Morning

- Introduction to the course and overview of the week
- **Group Work**
  - Session Zero: What is the persona of the AI you are using? What does it expect from the user?
- 5 Minute presentation by each group

- Artist presentation & discussion by Nora Al-Badri. https://www.nora-al-badri.de/works-index
  - The Other Nefretiti
  - Nefretiti Bot
  - Fossil Futures
  - Babylonian Visions

Afternoon

- Technological Persona

. Input by Felix Stalder

- **Group Work:** Reading, Presenting, Discussion

- Weizenbaum, Joseph. Computer Power and Human Reason: From Judgment to Calculation. San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1976. Introduction, 1-16
- Reeves, Byron, and Clifford Nass. The Media Equation: How People Treat Computers, Television and New Media like Real People and Places. New York: Cambridge university press, 1996.

  PDF
  - Chapter 7. Personality of Interfaces, 89-99
  - Chapter 8. Imitating Personality, 101- 109
- Reeves, Byron, and Clifford Nass. The Media Equation
  - Chapter 14. Gender, 161-170
  - Chapter 15. Voices, 171-180
- Niederberger, Shusha. "Calling the User: Interpellation and Narration of User Subjectivity in Mastodon and Trans*Feminist Servers." A Peer-Reviewed Journal About 12, no. 1 (September 7, 2023): 177–91.
- Lewis, Jason Edward, Noelani Arista, Archer Pechawis, and Suzanne Kite. "Making Kin with the Machines." Journal of Design and Science, July 16, 2018. (read until end of "Aloha as moral discipline" and then again, "Resisting Reduction: An Indigenous Path Forward")

Art Works

- Cornelia Sollfrank: Thoughts of a Server, Sound piece, 2024. https://soundcloud.com/purplenoise2018/thouhgts-of-a-server

Wendesday: Artistic Approaches and Post-Colonial Perspectives

Morning

Artistic Works

- !Mediengruppe Bitnik, Ashley Madison. Angels at Work. 2016, https://wwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww.bitnik.org/a
- Giacomo Meli, Infinite Coversation, 2022
  - https://jamez.it/project/the-infinite-conversation/
  - https://www.infiniteconversation.com/
- Lauren Lee McCarthy
  - Lauren, 2023 https://lauren-mccarthy.com/LAUREN
  - Someone, https://lauren-mccarthy.com/SOMEONE (NA)
- Mikala Hyldig Dal: Eco Oracle, https://www.mikala-dal.art/ (NA)
- Tega Brain, Alex Nathanson and Benedetta Piantella. Solar Protocol, https://tegabrain.com/Solar-Protocol (FS)
- Feileacan Kirkbride McCormick and Sofia Crespo. Entangled Others, https://entangledothers.studio (NA)
- Nora Al Badri, Nefertiti Bot, https://www.nora-al-badri.de/works-index#nefertitibot
- Stefanie, Dinkins, Not the Only One, 2018, https://www.stephaniedinkins.com/ntoo.html (FS)
- Mimi Ọnụọha. Library of Missing Datasets, Version 1.0, 2016, https://mimionuoha.com/the-library-of-missing-datasets (NA)
- Caroline Sniders, Feminist Data Set, 2017 — Current, https://carolinesinders.com/feminist-data-set/

- Linda Dunia Rebeiz, Once Upon A Garden, https://onceuponagarden.xyz/
- Holly Herndon: holly+ und xhairymutantx https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZe5fnFB-ZE (FS & NA)
- AJL: Voicing Erase, 2020, https://www.ajl.org/voicing-erasure (FS)
- Maya Indira Ganesh: A is for another https://aisforanother.net/pages/project.html

Group Work

Task: Create a concept/ prototype that responds to the topic of subjectivity and persona (AI and/or user) through a unconventional or underrepresented approach that can be realized performative, designed or programmed, or otherwise.

It doesn't need to fully function, but should make the personas, relations or interactions visible or experiential.

Steps:

1. come up in the group with personals, relations, interactions of different actors (AI and or user)
2. determine what it does require (e.g. what story, ressources, interface)
3. come up with prototype, design mock-up or performance

Time to present on Friday 10 minutes each, 5 minutes discussion each.

Afternoon

Input Nora Al-Badri:

APost-Colonial Perspectives & who is speaking

Further reading:

- AI-Myths: Ethics guidelines will save us (2020), https://www.aimyths.org/ethics-guidelines-will-save-us
- Arun, Chinmayi. 2020. "AI and the Global South: Designing for Other Worlds." In The Oxford Handbook of Ethics of AI, edited by Markus Dirk Dubber, Frank Pasquale, and Sunit Das. Oxford Handbooks Series. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- T.C. Boyle, "Water Music", 1981
- Césaire, Aimé. Discourse on Colonialism. Edited by Robin D. G. Kelley. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000. [orig. 1950]
- Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. 2021. Discriminating Data: Correlation, Neighborhoods, and the New Politics of Recognition. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press
- Danielle Coleman, Digital Colonialism: The 21st Century Scramble for Africa through the Extraction and Control of User Data and the Limitations of Data Protection Laws, 24 MICH. J. RACE & L. 417 (2019).
- María do Mar Castro Varela / Nikita Dhawan. 2015. "Postkoloniale Theorie. Eine kritische Einführung", Transcript Verlag.
- Mejias, Ulises A., and Nick Couldry. 2019. "Datafication." Internet Policy Review 8 (4)
- Mohamed, Shakir, Marie-Therese Png, and William Isaac. 2020. "Decolonial AI: Decolonial Theory as Sociotechnical Foresight in Artificial Intelligence." Philosophy & Technology 33 (4): 659–84. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-020-00405-8
- George Orwell, "Burmese Days", 1934

- Shankar, Shreya, Yoni Halpern, Eric Breck, James Atwood, Jimbo Wilson, and D. Sculley. 2017. “No Classification without Representation: Assessing Geodiversity Issues in Open Data Sets for the Developing World.” Presented at NIPS 2017 Workshop on Machine Learning for the Developing World
- Scheuerman, Morgan Klaus, Madeleine Pape, and Alex Hanna. 2021. “Auto-Essentialization: Gender in Automated Facial Analysis as Extended Colonial Project.” Big Data & Society 8 (2): 205395172110537.

Group Work

- Second Session, 120 Minutes

Thursday: Subjectivity and Personas

Morning

Short Texts, associative read and present one sentence

- Gayatry Spivak: Can the Subaltern Speak?, 1989
- Aimeé Césaire: Discourse on Colonialism, 1950
- Tuck/Yang: Decolonization is Not a Metaphor, 2012
- Frantz Fanon: The Wretched of the Earth, 1961
- Edward Said: Orientalism, 1978

Group Work

- Session Three

Afternoon:

Guests:

Dr. Kebene Wodajo Lecturer at the Department of Humanities, Social and Political Sciences, ETHZ

“**Subjectivity, Personhood, and AI Systems: Afro-Communitarian Gaze**

The modernist gaze narrates the story of data and data-driven technologies, such as AI systems, through an individualistic, state-centric, and market-oriented lens. Within this narrative, a person is conceptualised as an individual data subject who exercises control and retains rights over their data, while relying on state-centric frameworks for protection—or so the prevailing rhetoric suggests. But what if we were to shift our perspective, to cast our gaze towards the 'otherwise', towards the non-mainstream, towards pluralistic ways of seeing, being, and becoming? What if we viewed data and data-driven technologies in their full complexity—not merely as products/commodities, but rather as intricate sociotechnical, material, discursive, and more-than-human? This lecture invites students to embark together on this journey towards the 'otherwise', guided by Afro-communitarian perspectives. This viewpoint begins with 'we' rather than 'I', emphasises multiplicity over singularity, and foregrounds multiple ontologies and diverse forms of becoming. Adopting this gaze neither erases individuality nor diminishes the pursuit of equality, fairness, and transparency in AI systems. Rather, these concepts are illuminated in views from the 'otherwise'. They are understood not merely as

claims grounded in legally prescribed rights but as necessities arising from the inherent multiplicity within individuality itself—captured vividly in various Afro-communitarian principles, from the well-known 'I am because we are' to *'Namummaa'*. This gaze remains deeply attentive to personhood as entangled within plurality and relationality; and subjectivity, as a form of irreducibly emergent becoming.

Further Readings:

- Mhlambi, S. (2020). From rationality to relationality: Ubuntu as an ethical and human rights framework for artificial intelligence governance. In *Car center for human rights policy*, discussion paper series 220–009.
- Law, John (2015). What's wrong with a one-world world? *Distinktion*: *Journal of Social Theory*, 16(1) pp. 126–139

Dr. Ranjodh Singh Dhaliwal, Professor, Digital Humanities, Artificial Intelligence and Media Studies, University of Basel

The Perplexities of Persona and Personhood: On LLMs, Stereotypes, and Design Methods

Across industry and academia, a curious trend has emerged. From OpenAI to law firms and sociologists to policy analysts, several expert groups have started using large language models (LLMs) to model human perspectives. This lecture simply seeks to understand, contextualise, and investigate this phenomenon. We will look at the technical substrates of chatbots, which make them ripe for the use of 'personas,' a prompt engineering technique that instantiates different 'bots' from the same underlying AI model. What are the social, cultural, political, and affective implications of this world full of bots with personas? Staying with this question, Dhaliwal will then trace the spread of persona-bots in academic and corporate methodologies. Why and how he asks, do these communities expect (or desire) their bots to stand in for actual humans – be they sociological subjects or democratic actors – and how do such modes of thought succeed and fail?

Further Readings

- Bisbee, James, Joshua D. Clinton, Cassy Dorff, Brenton Kenkel, and Jennifer M. Larson. "Synthetic Replacements for Human Survey Data? The Perils of Large Language Models." *Political Analysis* 32, no. 4 (October 2024): 401–16. https://doi.org/10.1017/pan.2024.5.
- Blair, Margaret M. "Corporate Personhood and the Corporate Persona Symposium: In the Boardroom." *University of Illinois Law Review* 2013, no. 3 (2013): 785–820.
- Chapman, Christopher N, and Russell P Milham. "The Personas' New Clothes: Methodological and Practical Arguments against a Popular Method," n.d.
- Cheng, Myra, Esin Durmus, and Dan Jurafsky. "Marked Personas: Using Natural Language Prompts to Measure Stereotypes in Language Models." arXiv, May 29, 2023. https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2305.18189.
- Esposito, Roberto. *Persons and Things: From the Body's Point of View*. Translated by Zakiya Hanafi. Theory Redux. Cambridge Malden: Polity Press, 2015
- Koopman, Colin. *How We Became Our Data: A Genealogy of the Informational Person*. Chicago, [Illinois] London: The university of Chicago press, 2019.
- Seaver, Nick. "The Nice Thing about Context Is That Everyone Has It." *Media, Culture & Society* 37, no. 7 (October 1, 2015): 1101–9. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443715594102.
- Stark, Luke. "Animation and Artificial Intelligence." In *The 2024 ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency*, 1663–71. Rio de Janeiro Brazil: ACM, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1145/3630106.3658995.
- Adlin, Tamara, and John Pruitt. *The Essential Persona Lifecycle: Your Guide to Building and Using*

Personas. Morgan Kaufmann, 2010.
- An, J., H. Kwak, S. Jung, J. Salminen, M. Admad, and B. Jansen. “Imaginary People Representing Real Numbers: Generating Personas from Online Social Media Data.” *ACM Transactions on the Web* 12, no. 4 (November 30, 2018): 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1145/3265986.
- Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Repr. London: Penguin Books, 2007.
- Adorno, Theodor W. *The Authoritarian Personality*. La Vergne: Verso, 2019.
- Jung, C. G., and R. F. C. Hull. *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 1966.
- Cooper, Alan. *The Inmates Are Running the Asylum: Why High-Tech Products Drive Us Crazy and How to Restore the Sanity*. 15th ed. Indianapolis, Indiana: SAMS, 2015.
Young, Indi. *Mental Models*. Sebastopol: Rosenfeld Media, 2011.

Friday: Group Work and Presentations

Group Work

- Session Four: finishing up & preparing the presentation (09:00 - 10:45)

Presention: each 10 minutes presentation, 5 minutes discussion (11:00-13:00)

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